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IULIU MANIU, RUMANIAN STATESMAN

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Description

A review of the political career and current activities of the most important pro-Allied leader in Rumania, who may prove useful in undermining the German control of that country.

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IULIU MANIU, RUMANIAN STATESMAN

In a Rumanian state reconstituted on a democratic basis the strongest candidate for leadership would undoubtedly be Iuliu Maniu. Half a century of service in behalf of his countrymen, as well as in the democratic cause, has earned for the veteran politician both the support of at least a relative majority of the Rumanian nation and the esteem of the American and British governments. Admittedly his efforts to stem the tide of reaction in independent Rumania enjoyed but scant success. On the eve of the present war Maniu and the other Peasant party leaders had been reduced to helplessness, but he has never permitted either Carol or Marshal Antonescu to lose sight of the party's opposition to their policies. Unsullied as Maniu's personal reputation has remained throughout these difficult years, the question remains: can he hope to pilot the postwar Rumanian state along a democratic course? The biographical sketch which follows may throw some light on this question. Maniu's long career falls into two major phases -- the nationalistic struggle against Austro-Hungarian tyranny prior to the first World War, and the fight for democracy in Greater Rumania. His more recent undercover activities form a third phase which is still in progress.

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The Struggle Against Hungary (to 1919)

A member of the Rumanian minority in Hungary, Maniu was born in a Transylvanian village in 1873, and spent his student years at Cluj, Vienna, and Budapest. Following his admission to the bar in 1898, he settled in the town of Blaj, and was retained as counsel to the Uniate Church of Transylvania, of which he has been a devout adherent all his life. Although the Uniates are Catholics, recognizing the Pope's authority, their religious customs are in all other respects essentially the same as those of the Rumanian Orthodox Church, so that Maniu's religion has never handicapped his career as a national leader.

The young lawyer's political career had begun in 1897 with his appointment to the executive committee of the Rumanian National Party, a political group which was striving to achieve equality for Rumanians within the Hungarian state. Maniu's essential contribution to the Rumanian nationalist cause lies in the conversion of that movement from one of passive resistance to Hungarian domination into a program of energetic opposition and bold demands in the Hungarian Parliament and elsewhere for the rights of the Rumanian nationality. Like the Serb and other minority nationalities, the Rumanians had to wage an unremitting struggle for the use of their language in government offices and the army, and for the maintenance of their schools and churches, as well as against discriminatory economic practices.

During his four years as deputy in Budapest (1906-10), Maniu developed into a political leader of high calibre, although several years were to elapse before he attained formal recognition as head of his party. In 1915, following his negative response to Kaiser Wilhelm's

proposition that the Rumanians of Transylvania support the Triple Alliance, Maniu was sent to the front, but succeeded in continuing his political work during the war by means of trips back home and maintaining communication while serving as artillery officer in Russia and Italy. The year 1918 found him stationed at Vienna, and while still in the service of the Central Powers, he was authorized by the Rumanian National Council for Transylvania to act as its representative in diplomatic and military affairs. In the Austrian capital, Maniu led the revolt of the Rumanian troops, and from there he travelled to Prag, where, at the head of another contingent of Rumanian soldiers, he aided the Czechs to take power.

The transfer of Transylvania from Hungarian to Rumanian rule after the Armistice was carried out by a Directive Council under the presidency of Maniu. Instead of making sure, however, that the new government posts in his home province went to reliable persons in his party, Maniu was outwitted by the Bucharest regime, which proceeded to fill all but the minor offices with its own men. Rumanian politics thus continued to be dominated by the Liberals, a party of the right which made a travesty of its trade name and of the democratic principles to which it rendered lip-service. Led by one or another of the powerful Bratianu family since 1866, the Liberal party regularly employed dictatorial force against peasant groups, and exploited its political control of the State in order to enrich the upper class and a host of parasitic officials and their friends.

The Rumanian Politician, The National Peasant Party (1919-1930)

After the integration of Transylvania with Rumania had been completed, Maniu as president of the National party was faced during the decade 1919-28 with the problem of joining forces with democratic groups in other parts of the country in order to wrest power from the hands of the Liberals. Long drawn-out negotiations had to be carried on with the Peasant party of Old Rumania, led by Ion Mihalache, which, having won the battle for parcelling out the large estates among the peasants, was now likewise determined to oust the Liberals and install a democratic regime.

Despite the common interests of the parties of Maniu and Mihalache, their differences as to the filling of government posts after defeating the Liberals were not composed until the autumn of 1926. The National Peasant Party was then formed, and Maniu took his place as president of a greater political movement which was on the rise in every province of Greater Rumania.

The National Peasant party has on occasion been described as analogous to England's Labour party, but a closer comparison could be made with the British Liberals. A democratic party, Maniu has always contended, must be founded not on the class struggle but on national solidarity. That the peasant masses are by nature both laborers and capitalists has remained the cardinal principle of his party. While no one need doubt Maniu's genuine concern with the peasant's plight, his outlook is that of the conservative democrat who would never dream of tampering with the distribution of wealth, even while endeavoring to remedy social evils and to oppose the will of the vested interests by purging the bureaucracy.

The original program adopted by the National Peasants called for: 1. Revision of the constitution to ensure a greater degree of civil liberties; 2. decentralization of the state power; 3. limitation of compulsory military service to one year; 4. expansion of educational facilities; 5. satisfaction of the obligations assumed with regard to the minority nationalities. On the economic side the platform pledged the party to establish the parity of foreign and domestic capital investments, to follow a policy of laisser-faire for business, and to avoid undue encouragement of industry in order to allow more adequate aid for agriculture.

The National Peasant party succeeded in obtaining 78% of the votes cast in the election of December 1928, an achievement which no Rumanian party has equalled before or since that time. Maniu became Premier. During his brief term, which lasted until October 1930, Maniu's government promptly initiated a series of much-needed elementary reforms. Press censorship was abolished and political prisoners were liberated. Thousands of superfluous government jobs were eliminated; the gendarmerie, reduced from 23,000 to 16,000, were restricted to their proper duties as rural police, and a more sympathetic attitude was adopted toward the minorities who formed a quarter of the total population. The centralized administration was extensively modified in the direction of greater autonomy for the provinces and of local self-government. The fiscal system was reorganized, and measures in behalf of the debt-ridden and backward peasantry initiated. Although permanence could scarcely be expected of changes undertaken during a two-year period, the Rumanian government has to this day continued to benefit by the system of "autonomous institutes," which include the railroads and the several state

monopolies, an important source of revenue which had previously been seriously abused by corrupt officials.

The defeat of the Liberals in 1928 did not, of course, break their economic power, which they exploited in a campaign to discredit their opponents. Moreover, the beginning of the depression period magnified the difficulties confronting Maniu far beyond anything which might have been anticipated. As it happened, the most important demand of the peasants, the land reforms, had been granted before 1928, and the Maniu regime could not with its limited resources solve the other needs, such as the purchase of farm implements.

Maniu and Carol (1930-1940)

Hoping to achieve some degree of stability in order to carry out the necessary reforms, the Premier in June 1930 arranged for the return from exile of Prince Carol, who had at the end of 1925, because of public distaste at his extra-marital activities, renounced the throne in favor of his son. The wayward prince had posed as a democrat (in 1940 he was still optimistic enough to resume this attitude during his second exile), and it is not unlikely that Maniu was deceived into believing that he would be content to take his place as one of the three members of the regency. It is not certain whether Maniu had succeeded in eliciting from Carol a definite pledge that he would keep his mistress outside the country and would attempt a reconciliation with his wife, Princess Helen, but it is known that the puritanical Maniu would not have brought Carol back if he had thought that Madame Lupescu would return also. After Carol ascended the throne, he undermined the moral prestige of the crown by breaking his word and smuggling his disreputable paramour into the country. The

strait-laced Premier considered it his duty to resign in protest. Maniu's unfortunate tendency to withdraw from the arena and sulk, when events violate his strict views, has all along weakened his effectiveness.

Apparently realizing that the other leaders of his party would bring pressure on him to compromise with Carol in order to stay in power, Maniu gave up the Party presidency and would not reconsider when the central organ of the National Peasants refused to accept his resignation. Maniu remained, nevertheless, the most important figure in his party, attempting to save it from a split by assuming the Premiership briefly toward the end of 1932, and returning to the presidency in the dark days when the fascist regime had declared all parties illegal.

As King Carol asserted his personal power and collaborated with the Liberals in destroying the vestiges of constitutional government, Maniu's opposition assumed a restrained form from which it has scarcely departed to the present day. He continued to sit as Senator, but consistently declined to compromise his principles by participating in any coalition cabinet. On the other hand, he wished to see Carol driven to drop his democratic pretense, and to help expose him as an avowed dictator. To evade the press censorship, particularly in the later 'thirties, criticism of the regime had to be expressed in memoranda submitted to the King or in speeches which could not be printed, but which were distributed circumspectly in hectographed form. For such activities Maniu was summoned, while Carol still reigned, to appear before the Council of War, although no action was taken. When the death knell of free speech was sounded and the constitution of January 1938 imposed upon a demoralized public, Maniu, though in no position even to voice a protest, made his

stand clear by declining to take part in the regime headed by Patriarch Miron Cristea (since deceased). Finally, after Greater Rumania had been whittled down by forced territorial cessions to three neighboring states, Maniu saw his opportunity to speed the perfidious Carol on his way to oblivion. On 30 August 1940, the day of the Hitler-sponsored partition of Transylvania, Maniu attended the Crown Council meeting in his capacity as ex-Premier. Received in audience with the King, he declared, "I do not see how your Majesty will be able to save the throne and the country." He followed this broad hint with messages to Marshal Antonescu urging him to force Carol to abdicate. Thus Maniu, after bringing back the King, opposed the Royal dictatorship.

Since the German Occupation

If open opposition became virtually impossible in the latter years of Rumanian independence, any such behavior would be foolhardy for Maniu under the present military dictatorship supported by the Germans. Officially he has been spared internment or worse on the promise of refraining from active opposition to the German cause. Secretly he has been striving to hasten an Allied victory. In his anxiety to save Rumania, he has even brought himself to disregard a lifetime of political hostility, and has joined forces with the Liberals, under the current Bratianu, to form a United Opposition. In his efforts to make a deal for Rumania with Britain and the U.S., he has, however, hoped to drive a wedge between the Russians and the Anglo-Americans. For some time he believed that the Western Allies could be persuaded to protect Rumania against the declared Soviet intention of re-annexing northern Bucovina and

Bessarabia, and believed that they were in a position to compel Hungary to restore northern Transylvania. Maniu now believes himself able to oust Antonescu and to take power as soon as British or American troops get within striking distance of the Danube, but he has never acknowledged himself ready to surrender to the Soviets, a gesture which until recently seemed virtually impossible for any Rumanian politician. He has, on the other hand, requested Allied broadcasters not to incite the Rumanians to commit sabotage, for fear of German reprisal. It is characteristic of the nationalistic principles which are the common denominator of the major Rumanian political groups, that the Antonescu regime itself has sent out peace feelers to the British and Americans, offering to surrender at the earliest possible opportunity, if only the Soviet menace can be kept within bounds.

More recently, it is true, Maniu has been quoted as declaring himself ready to work with the USSR, which indicates that he is probably no longer intransigent on the territorial question, but he arrived at this decision only after it had been clearly indicated to him that Britain and the U.S. would not deal separately with the Rumanians, and that some Rumanian would have to make his country's peace with the USSR. In this respect, too, however, the Marshal has caught up with him. The most recent message from the Antonescu regime to the West asks only for assurance that unconditional surrender will leave Rumania a sovereign state, even if reduced in extent. The agreement on foreign policy between Antonescu and his United Opposition is so close that it was not surprising that Maniu last August joined with Vice-Premier Mihai Antonescu in a renewed effort to reach an understanding with Britain and the U.S.

The threat of punishment has not deterred Maniu from cooperating with pro-Allied elements among surviving Rumanian political leaders any more than from communicating with Germany's enemies outside. There is reason to believe that he is in close touch with young King Michael, known to be anti-German. The King, for example, may well have been influenced by Maniu, when he recently insisted on the appointment of Alexander Cretzianu as Minister to Ankara, the most convenient rendezvous for contact with the United Nations. Cretzianu's record of opposition to Antonescu's policy of collaborating with Germany made him persona non grata to the Marshal but it also guaranteed that he if anyone could get the ear of the British and Americans.

As a substitute for an underground press, Maniu has drawn up a considerable series of memoranda (some signed jointly with Constantine I. Bratianu as president of the Liberal Party), which have been sent to Marshal Antonescu and then circulated in trustworthy circles. At an early stage he prepared a detailed statement regarding the economic exploitation of Rumania by the Germans, and on various occasions messages have been sent to Antonescu protesting against the sacrifice of the Rumanian army on the Eastern front. Unable to disregard Maniu's activity, a government propagandist (Prof. Nichifor Crainic), in an address made at Cernautzi last October, felt constrained to take cognizance of the memoranda and their distribution. He referred to them as the futile efforts of a "has been" to recover his popularity, but the mere fact that he mentioned them at all indicates that he knows they are nothing of the sort. In view of the virtually helpless position of the pro-Allied groups in the country, the fact that Maniu has risked his neck in signing such documents is in itself evidence of a courage rarely found in politics.

It is undoubtedly too late for Maniu to hope for the liberation of his country by Anglo-American troops, who would obviously meet with a reception very different from that which awaits the Red Army. If Maniu lives through the months to come and retains his leadership even after the Soviet Union re-annexes Bessarabia and northern Bucovina, it remains an open question whether he will be acceptable to the Russians. It is true that Maniu has never agitated against Bolshevism, strongly as he rejects it, but he is known both as an irredentist and as a protagonist of a Danubian federation,-- views which are hardly likely to commend him to those responsible for the Kremlin's foreign policy. Moreover, if Maniu returns to act as Premier of an independent state, he will inevitably tend to look to Great Britain and the U.S. for support in his difficulties with the Soviet Union.

The Future

Favorably impressed as most students of Rumanian politics are with the strength of character and loyalty to democracy for which Maniu is noted, they may err in expecting too much of him. Even his admirers admit that Maniu has to be prodded into action and prefers to hold back so long as there is any doubt as to his chances of success. His self-confidence has probably not improved during the past ten years, in which his popularity has not been put to the test. As an opposition leader he did not distinguish himself as a practical administrator, and he cannot escape a share of the blame for the helpless level to which the National Peasant party had sunk as early as 1938. It is hard to believe that

Maniu will be able to cope with the disorders which may follow the overthrow of Antonescu. It is likewise discouraging to consider that Maniu's political associates are old men like himself, who have apparently failed to train a younger generation to carry on their work. With the Soviet forces occupying the region east of the Prut River, with the outlook dark for the recovery of northern Transylvania from Hungary, and with Rumania forced as a loser to make amends for Antonescu's folly, peace is bound to bring disillusionment. Maniu, no less than his adversaries to the right, has always depended for his support on the ideal of a Greater Rumania. The post-war Rumania will almost surely be a lesser Rumania. If it is headed by Maniu and other men of good will, even if they are personally resilient enough to accept the inevitable and to make a fresh start, they will face a thankless task. They will have to proceed along entirely new lines in order to gain popular support, and to arrive even at tentative solutions for the peacetime problems of a backward country.